



Indulgences: 'The Worst Abuse': A.D. 1113

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the reader with a series of pleasantly gentle shocks resembling the wise-cracks of Christopher Fry. His paradoxes are achieved by the juxtaposition of the sublime and the everyday, and the effect, though sometimes ludicrous, is often amusing, and is as transient as are the babblings of a comedian. Biebl died last November aged 53.

The work of F. Halas (1901–49), son of a mill-hand, a proletarian in outlook, and a poet of sonorous nihilism, decay and the grave is that of a lesser Machar, and echoes the mood of Neruda’s ‘Cemetery Flowers’. Much of this poet’s work derives—says Ripellino—from that of T. S. Eliot. His last collection of poems ‘In Line’ (1938–49) appeared too late for mention in Ripellino’s book.

Vilém Závada (1905), the poet of Ostrava, has all the gloom of his fellow-countryman Bezruč, who is now in his eighty-fifth year, and is unaccountably omitted from Ripellino’s galaxy. To Závada the lurid night skies of the Moravian Black Country symbolise the subterranean ragings of an apocalyptic inferno, ever ready to burst forth and engulf the helpless mortals who are the victims of poverty and war-hysteria. Whereas Halas’s nihilism breathes the dank smell of earth-rot, Závada’s reeks with the stench of sulphurous fumes belched from the bowels of the industrial underworld.

V. Holan, a contemporary of Závada, is the metaphysical poet of the present age, epigon of an unusual trio: Rilke, Valéry and—Khlebnikov. A dealer in abstract values, Holan is half poet, half philosopher. As an admirer of Russia, his recent poetry is attuned to communist themes drawn against a background of slavism that Svatopluk Čech would have enjoyed.

As Závada is the poet of darkness and despair, J. Zahradniček (1905) is the poet of light and hope, a mood derived from the comforting security of the Roman Catholic faith. His ecstatic religious moods of sublimated eroticism are typified in the title of one of his collections, ‘Under the Lash of Mercy’. All this, and his eulogies of the saints, seems to belong to an earlier age.

So much for the chief characters in Ripellino’s entertaining book, which is more than a mere farrago of essays interlarded with reproductions of modern paintings. It provides a much-needed background for the understanding of modern trends in Czech poetry. Understandably there is no trace in it of the present West European wave of restrained classicism, and for this reason, or in spite of it, the future work of Czech poets will be awaited with pleasure and curiosity.

Indulgences—‘The Worst Abuse’—A.D. 1113

RODERICK PAGE THALER

IN certain quarters it has become a custom recently to claim that most important ideas originated in the minds of Russian thinkers. It is emphatically not my purpose to support this notion. Nevertheless, it may be

interesting to see how early one Russian thinker had an idea which was later to become very important in western religious history.

It is well known that Martin Luther's attack on the 'sale of indulgences'¹—the immediate cause of his break with the Roman Catholic Church—was by no means the first such attack. Among numerous others, more or less bitter, Chaucer's satirical, but understanding picture of the avaricious Pardoner may be mentioned as a familiar example.² The Roman Catholic Church itself, as early as the Fourth Lateran Council, had established rules to limit the granting of indulgences.³

Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses in 1517, Chaucer sketched his Pardoner about 1390, and the Fourth Lateran Council met in 1215. But the Russian Primary Chronicle, completed about the year 1113, contains a vigorous and unequivocal attack on the 'sale of indulgences'. In the account of the baptism of the first Christian Russian prince, Vladimir, the chronicler says that 'the priests explained to him the tenets of the Christian faith, urging him to avoid the deceit of heretics . . .' These Eastern Orthodox priests particularly warned him: 'Do not accept the teachings of the Latins, whose instruction is vicious. . . . Avoid their doctrine, for they absolve sins against money payments, which is the worst abuse of all.'⁴

The foregoing account comes in the entry for the year 988, but seems to have been written at least a century later. Professor Cross, who translated the Chronicle into English, says in his Introduction that the redaction he used dates from about 1113. He says further: 'The fact that all eye-witness material follows the year 1050 renders it both possible and probable that one author only was occupied in its preparation, which extended over a period of one or more decades.'⁵ It was in the year 1054 that the final break occurred between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. The author of the Chronicle, an Eastern Orthodox monk, writing not long after that, could hardly be expected to be friendly to the Roman Catholic Church. A distinguished student of the history of the Eastern Church has recently shown that the author of the Chronicle was militantly anti-Roman Catholic and opposed to any sort of 'friendly relations with the Christian West'.⁶

This Russian chronicler of the late 11th and early 12th centuries was not the last Russian, in a time of awkward east-west relations, to seize on, magnify, and publicise any flaw in western institutions. But it is curious that he should so early have chosen the 'sale of indulgences' for

¹ Martin Luther, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. J. K. F. Knaake, Weimar, 1883, I, pp. 233 ff.

² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales. Prologue*, lines 669 ff., in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, Boston, 1933, p. 26.

³ Philippe Labbe and Gabriel Cossart (eds.), 'Decreta Generalis Concilii Lateranensis, IV, sub Innocentio Papa III', ch. 62, in *Sacrosancta Concilia*, 21 vols., Venice, 1728–33, XIII, pp. 998–9. See also fn. 7.

⁴ Samuel H. Cross (tr.), 'The Russian Primary Chronicle' (*Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, Cambridge, Mass., 1930, XII, pp. 201, 203, 204). Russian text: Ye. F. Karsky (ed.), 'Povest' vremennykh let' (*Polnoye sobraniye russkikh letopisey*, 2nd edn., Leningrad, 1926, I, pp. 112, 114, 116.)⁵ Cross, p. 97.

⁶ Nicholas Zernov, 'Vladimir and the Origin of the Russian Church' (*The Slavonic and East European Review*, XXVIII, No. 71, 1950, p. 434).

attack as ‘the worst abuse of all’. A brief review of the differences between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic doctrines of the nature of absolution may help to explain why he did so.

According to the Roman Catholic doctrine, when a repentant sinner confesses his sins, the priest absolves him, freeing him from the spiritual punishment he would otherwise have had to suffer. But there may remain a temporal punishment. Satisfaction must be made for this, either in Purgatory or by some form of penance such as additional fasting, prayers, or pilgrimages. Or the temporal punishment may be remitted by an indulgence, ‘... which remission is granted by the Church in the exercise of the power of the keys, through the application of the superabundant merits of Christ and of the saints, and for some just and reasonable motive’.⁷

According to the Eastern Orthodox doctrine, when a repentant sinner confesses his sins, God, through the priest, absolves him. This absolution frees the sinner from all the penalties of sin, temporal as well as spiritual. Therefore ‘... the Roman doctrine of satisfaction for sins on the part of the repentant is definitely rejected’.⁸ The Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, as a place for the temporal punishment of sins for which satisfaction was not made on earth, is also rejected. Penances are often imposed, but they are thought of as a spiritual tonic, helping the sinner to overcome his sinful habits, not as satisfaction for his sins. The Roman doctrine of works of supererogation is regarded as false, there is no ‘Treasury of merits’, and the good works of one man cannot be applied to counterbalance the sins of another. Since, then, according to the Eastern Orthodox view, the doctrines of satisfaction and of works of supererogation are both false, the doctrine of indulgences, founded on these, is doubly false.⁹ Finally, as the chronicler intimates, a practice which is doctrinally false becomes still worse when it is abused by corrupt priests for their own financial advantage.

Hence the chronicler described the absolution of sins against money payments as the worst abuse of all. Four hundred years later Luther, in turn, held that one who, instead of helping the poor, ‘gives his money for pardons, is not purchasing indulgences ... but the wrath of God’.¹⁰

⁷ Father W. H. Kent, ‘Indulgences’ (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York, 1913, VII, pp. 783 ff.). See also *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, VI Session, Decree on Justification, ch. 14; XXV Session, Decree of Indulgences.

⁸ Sergei Victorovich Troitsky (of the Chancery of the Procurator-General of the Most Holy Synod), ‘Greek Orthodox Church’ (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Edinburgh, 1913, VI, p. 434).

⁹ Peter Mogila, Metropolitan of Kiev, ‘The Orthodox Confession of Faith of the Catholic and Apostolic Church of the East’, part I, question 112, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols., New York, 1877, II, p. 390; Philaret (Vasily Mikhaylovich Drozdov), Metropolitan of Moscow, ‘The Longer Catechism of the Orthodox, Catholic, Eastern Church’, part I, questions 351–6, *ibid.*, p. 500; Troitsky, *loc. cit.*, p. 422.

¹⁰ Luther, I, p. 235. Thesis 45.